# A Spark Plug of Learning: Reflecting on Co-op Experiences at Seneca's Teaching & Learning Centre

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**Martina Gasparro is a student in the Accounting and Financial Management program at the University of Waterloo. Sruthee Jeyapalan, a student also enrolled in the Honours Arts and Business program at Waterloo University, focused on majoring in Legal Studies while minoring in HRM. Their recent completion of a work term at the Teaching & Learning Centre (T&LC) through their co-op program at Waterloo offered a wealth of insights and opportunities for reflection. In a Spark Plug moment, Martina and Sruthee dive into the reflections of their co-op work term and the diverse opportunities presented by the Teaching & Learning Centre.**

## What were your goals coming into the co-op work term, and did you meet them?

*Martina*: One of my goals coming into the co-op work term was to learn more about what an instructional designer does daily. In the past, I have had experience in the teaching realm and some design-based roles, but this was the first time I was combining both. Another goal I had was learning about what I like in a job. For example, I learned that I like having deadlines and choosing how to manage my time, rather than getting a time budget for a project. Further, I wanted to understand what my strengths were and develop my skills. Through this experience, I learned that I am good at detail-oriented tasks. Some skills I developed include logo design, experience using Storyline and Rise, accessibility design, copyediting, and communication. Overall, I believe that I met all my goals and have grown as an employee over the term.

*Sruthee*: When applying for the instructional design assistant position, I was drawn to working at Seneca, within the the teaching and learning space because I saw it as a fantastic opportunity to immerse myself in the dynamic post-secondary education sector, fostering a deeper grasp of its complexities. My goal was to work closely with instructors, seasoned

designers, and Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) to gain a deep understanding of the field of instructional design. The focus was on developing skills in creating efficient educational resources and utilizing technology to improve the quality of learning. My main goals were to master the use of programs like Adobe and Articulate 360, but also to comprehend the subtleties of educational design, make information accessible to all users, and use creative approaches to engage students. And I got the opportunity to do just that during my stay at Seneca's Teaching & Learning Center. Collaborating with experts from many academic backgrounds proved to be a priceless opportunity that greatly aided in my own development.

## Can you describe your experience integrating into the team at the Teaching & Learning Centre?

*Martina*: Thanks to the support of the Teaching & Learning Centre, the integration went very smoothly. Our onboarding training from Dani and Janice was very detailed and the team was happy to answer any question I had; in fact, asking questions was encourage to further learning. We also received sufficient communication even before the term started including an onboarding module provided by the previous co-op students. Additionally, we had the opportunity to explore other topics we enjoyed, and our manager, Naomi, was happy to connect us with other Seneca employees in various fields. Everyone in the Teaching & Learning Centre was friendly and welcoming!

*Sruthee*: I was genuinely touched by the warm welcome and incredible support I received while integrating into the team at the Teaching & Learning Centre. The onboarding experience was truly exceptional and left a lasting impression on me. Dani, Janice, Naomi, and Anh crafted a thoughtful 1-2 week onboarding program for us co-op members. It was like a crash course in essential tools like Storyline, Rise, and AODA standards. This immersive initiation provided a solid foundation for diving into our responsibilities. What stood out was the hands-on approach they took. Instead of just orienting us, they involved us immediately in various ongoing projects. From event planning for Teaching & Learning Day and the holiday party to contributing to curriculum integration projects, these opportunities allowed us to not only learn but also actively participate in meaningful initiatives. Moreover, the chance to collaborate with different team members on smaller office projects was invaluable. It was through these collaborations that I quickly got to know the team and felt like an integral part of it. The inclusivity and openness within the team made the integration process smooth and enjoyable. The willingness of everyone to share knowledge and work together fostered a supportive environment that greatly contributed to my growth within the team.

## How did you apply what you learned in your program to your co-op position?

*Martina*: On the surface, there may not seem to be much crossover between Accounting and

Financial Management and being an Instructional Designer. However, I took many courses that provided me with the skills to succeed in this position. One course I took was all about creating and giving financial presentations, which taught me basic design principles that I applied as an Instructional Design Assistant. I also learned valuable communication skills in that course, which helped me present ideas and talk to the team during meetings. Another course that provided me with valuable skills was my accounting-related courses. In accounting, I learned how to be detail-oriented and pick out small mistakes. I used this skill in essentially every project I worked in, especially AODAs. I believe that paying attention to the little details makes a huge difference.

*Sruthee*: My time at Waterloo studying legal studies and HRM was a fantastic fit for my work as an Instructional Design Assistant at Seneca's Teaching & Learning Center. Having a background in legal studies helped me to strictly follow the AODA accessibility rules in our teaching materials, which promoted inclusivity for a range of audiences. Navigating the legal systems governing instructional content required this knowledge. However, my HRM coursework gave me a distinct set of abilities. They gave me the teamwork, communication, and organizing abilities I needed to organize the work I was doing that could potentially improve student learning, and aid with course design. Because of the combination of these Waterloo disciplines, I am particularly equipped to approach instructional design with a thorough awareness of legal compliance, inclusivity collaborative teamwork, and technology innovation in educational development stems from the synthesis of these disciplines at Waterloo.

## What have you learned from the projects you've worked on?

*Martina*: It would be impossible to recount everything I learned so I condensed it to what stood out the most. One thing I learned was how essential communication is to a project, even if it is not collaborative in its nature. I have saved a lot of time by clarifying things rather than trying to guess what someone meant in their instructions and trying to figure it out on my own. Communication is also essential for meeting deadlines as small updates provide supervisors with a better understanding of your workload and help them make informed decisions. Some of my favourite projects I worked on were planning events, such as the Teaching & Learning Day and the holiday party, designing logos, and creating a newsletter. I did not have much experience in all three of these areas, so I thought they were all great learning opportunities. The guidance that Dani, Naomi, Anh, and the entire team provided helped me navigate these projects and deliver outputs that I was genuinely proud of.

*Sruthee*: One crucial lesson I've learned from my projects is the art of attention to detail and cultivating a designer's eye. Designing educational content demands a heightened level of attentiveness, particularly in understanding what catches the eye when someone encounters it for the first time. Learning to discern what looks appealing, what stands out, and what might distract the audience has been a pivotal skill to develop. It's essential in crafting

engaging learning materials that resonate effectively with students. I've also discovered the immense value of open dialogue, especially with a manager or someone more experienced in a particular area. Having the opportunity to discuss and receive instructions without feeling judged or hesitant to ask questions has been crucial. It's not just helpful; it's almost necessary for personal and professional growth within a role. This kind of environment allows for learning from mistakes or challenges without feeling pressured, fostering a space where learning and development truly flourish.

## How did working at Seneca affect your career path?

*Martina*: Working with Seneca allowed me to explore a career path that I was relatively unfamiliar with and helped me understand the daily work that an instructional designer deals with. In the future, I will continue to explore design-related fields and use what I learned from this experience to navigate my career path. Furthermore, I will take into consideration the elements of this job that I enjoyed and try to look for similar elements in future job searches. After working at Seneca, I feel more confident in my design capabilities and am excited to apply the various skills I learned to projects I encounter in my career path. Additionally, seeing so many individuals on the Teaching & Learning Team that are passionate about their work was very motivating and I hope that my career path allows me to demonstrate similar passion.

*Sruthee*: The time I spent at Seneca had a significant effect on my career development. I acquired my hands-on experience in educational design and development as an Instructional Design Assistant. Plus, my experience went beyond skill development; it broadened my understanding of crucial areas like sustainability, curriculum integration, truth and reconciliation, and cultivating inclusive learning environments. These aspects became integral to my professional growth, enriching my perspective on creating educational settings that are not only welcoming but also just and equitable. Lastly, the collaborative environment played a pivotal role in my development. It provided valuable opportunities for mentorship and learning from experienced professionals, further enhancing my knowledge and skills. This environment fostered a culture of continuous learning, enabling me to dive deeper into these critical areas and incorporate them into my approach to instructional design and educational practices.

We wanted to take a moment to express our deepest gratitude to Naomi, Anh, Dani, Amy, and the entire Teaching & Learning Centre Team for their unwavering support and guidance during our time at the Teaching & Learning Centre. Their mentorship and encouragement have been instrumental in shaping our experience during this co-op term. Their insights and expertise have been invaluable, guiding us through various new projects and helping us grow both personally and professionally.

We'd also like to extend a heartfelt thank you to all the team members we had the pleasure of working with during this term. Their warmth and willingness to collaborate made completing projects a rewarding experience. Their contributions and shared knowledge have been indispensable, enriching our learning journey in ways we hadn't imagined. We are genuinely grateful for the opportunity to have worked alongside such dedicated and inspiring individuals. Their support has not only contributed to our growth but has also left a lasting impression on our journey. Thank you for everything.

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